

Ancestor Worship - Ancestor Worship In China

family family living dead ancestral



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In China, the practice of ancestor worship has existed since ancient times, and it emphasized continuity of family lines. *Filial piety*, advocated by the Confucian teachings of the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E., emphasized respect for senior family members (Granet 1975). The practice of ancestor worship, therefore, can be seen as an extension of this reverence. Additionally, the family was viewed as a closely united group of living and dead relatives. Unity of the entire kin group was also reinforced through religious acts at temples that honored all ancestral spirits.

Photos offered in a Malaysian temple illustrate a form of ancestor worship. Ancestor worship is based on the belief that spirits of the dead can influence the affairs of the living. SIMON ARNOLD; EYE
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Rites of reverence were also held at home and gravesites. Ancestral shrines containing tablets bearing the names of recently deceased ancestors were maintained in homes, and rites were observed before them. The ancestral tablets, which are the locus of worship for the deceased, operate in two ways within the practice of ancestor worship. In one way they are like the ancestral hall, showing outsiders the public face of the lineage. In another way, they represent the lineage as a body of individual members. Ancestor festivals occur around

the fifteenth of July, during which items such as fruit, preserves, candies, two or more bowls containing fragrant wood, some lotus or other flowers in the vase, and a number of dishes or bowls of cooked food are placed in front of the shrine. If the family can afford it, one or more priests are invited to read scriptures and perform certain rituals before the shrine during this period (Hsu 1948).

Emily Ahern (1973) emphasizes that the reciprocal obligation between the living and the dead is an important element in Chinese family life. For example, in a Chinese village that Ahern studied, the living are expected to care for the dead in payment of the debts they owe them, and, in turn, the living hope to obtain the good life as they perceive it: wealth, rich harvests, and offspring who will ensure undying memory and sustenance in the afterlife.

The state of ancestor worship in modern China is unclear, but it was reported to be disappearing (Welch 1969) under the Communist regime. Rennselaer Lee (1964) argues that the Chinese Communists have been fundamentally hostile towards religion, but the government solicited the cooperation of religious leaders in an attempt to create the new China. Others, however, are more cynical of these governmental efforts (Levenson 1965) and report that religious repression has been severe (Welch 1969).

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